

## Reviews

**Lisa Schirch**, *Ritual and Symbol in Peacebuilding*. Bloomfield CT: Kumarian Press, 2005. x + 209pp. ISBN 1565491947 (pbk)

Building peace with ritual is like dancing in the dragon's jaws. Ritual is a brave ballerina eluding the grip of Nazi fangs. Ritual is a smoke-washed Native person cleaning off generations of oppression. Ritual is a circle of women standing firm against the tides of patriarchy. Ritual is a group of ethnically divided girls swimming together while political winds try to blow them apart. Ritual empowers people to be free even while in the grip of conflict.

This book is rich in examples, such as those alluded to above, and largely eschews simplistic solutions. In this respect, it is unlike some of the more 'pop psych' texts that are found in the literature on conflict resolution, even though some of these (such as Fisher and Urry's *Getting to Yes*) are cited more or less approvingly. It is most useful for providing a series of examples (pp.3-13, 173-4) of the use of ritual and symbol in peacebuilding, and guiding the reader through a reflection on those rituals or symbols and their concrete effects. Analysis of ritual or symbol barely goes beyond the average cultural anthropology textbook (see the discussion of Victor Turner's work on pp.141-3), but that is not the point. Rather, what is demonstrated is that such rituals and symbols remind participants in conflict of their shared humanity, create incentives to build peace, and sometimes show a way through the parties' disagreements.

There is very little of the ritual and symbol associated with the world religions here. This is strange, because the world religions have been factories of ritual and symbol – they are the multinationals who produce the best known brands. Although their role in conflict is well known, so is their role in peacemaking, and it would be interesting to reflect on how they mobilise their rituals and symbols in such efforts. However, this book contains rather more analysis of the 'informal', 'spontaneous' or 'improvised' rituals that exist outside formal religious or cosmological settings, some of which are scarcely recognisable as ritual to the participants. A handshake, a meal, throwing horse-shoes and passing a Native American peace pipe are all examples that are discussed in this book, as are more elaborate, but nevertheless improvised, feminist rituals such as the Take Back the Night ritual, which was a response to domestic violence in the USA (pp.132-3). Sadat and Begin threw horse-shoes together at Camp David, and it has been argued that the convivial atmosphere contributed to the accords between Egypt and Israel (pp.7-8); a similarly convivial atmosphere of 'food, seating arrangements at meals, the ambience of beautifully decorated Nordic houses, good wine and whiskey, coffee, cigarettes, CNN, and gorgeous views of mountains and pine forests' constituted a 'silent poetry' allowing Israeli and Palestinian negotiators to progress towards the Oslo accords.

If this seems obvious, then Schirch pleads guilty. As such, the best summary is written in her own words:

This book connects the work of ritual studies scholars, particularly what they have written about ritual's role in conflict, to the field of conflict studies and peacebuilding. . . I often felt as if I was writing down the obvious. . . There is a place for articulating what we know intuitively. This book provides words, theoretical frameworks, definitions, and lists of functions to the capacity for using ritual in peacebuilding. It moves peacebuilding scholars from an intuitive sense that ritual is important to their work toward an academic and conceptual justification of the need to include ritual spaces and dramas. Peacebuilders, and the funding community that sponsors peacebuilding programs, have barely begun to recognize the potential of ritual in their crucial work' (p.161).

Of course, there are gaps. As I have pointed out, the analysis of ritual and symbol is basic, and there is very little discussion of the rituals and symbols associated with the world religions (the Mennonite footwashing ritual is an exception). Furthermore, there is no discussion of the importance of attitudes to peace, such as pacifism, which often has its own rituals. There seems to be a strangely starry-eyed view of the role of the United States in peacebuilding around the world, though there are discussions of the history of slavery and the treatment of Native Americans. The American position on Israel has clearly influenced her, at least subconsciously, and leads her to analyse Camp David as providing for Israeli 'needs' while merely 'saving face for Sadat' (p.8), which is something of an orientalist cliché.

However, she also refers to two demonstrations in Israel/Palestine, one advocating peace, which was 'highly intellectual and composed of speeches about justice', the other advocating 'the rights of settlers', which included 'dancing, singing, and passion'. The resultant question encapsulates the central contribution of this book: 'Can peacebuilders find a way to supplement their calls for justice with rituals that inspire, involve, and create passion' (p.118)?

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